

# The Spaceman's Manual

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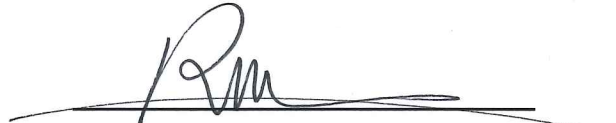
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*Crash. Bang. Screech. Skid. Silence... A grey figure emerges from the crumpled remains of a crashed spaceship, dizzy; his boots kicking up an orange dust that claws at the thin atmosphere like a million fiery nails. The figure is alone with his thoughts: "It wasn't the roughest landing... Only funny because it's true."*

The most Universal mythological trope that has carried its way into modern story telling is the arch of the Hero's Journey. The Hero's Journey is a story in which a seemingly average character is spurred into adventure after a life-altering event, eventually elevated to the role of the "hero" after a series of trials and tribulations. The possibility that anyone can be remarkable is at the soul of this storytelling arch, and is especially apparent in American culture, a culture that embraces and idolizes individuality. This self-centered cultural step towards one's discovery of self-worth is an exciting one; but with no all-encompassing guide through the journey called Life, how is one supposed to navigate right, wrong, and the fuzzy areas in between?

My work playfully explores the notion of the modern hero and its modern relevance by presenting a "hero" that is imperfect in every way, even to the point of ineptitude. This hero is The Lonely Spaceman, prone to loneliness (as his name denotes), foolhardiness, and basic human error. His entire Universe, including his motivation to explore, lies within the Spaceman's Manual, a dogmatic text that prescribes impossible standards of behavior, while promising the reader meaning and purpose. Although The Lonely Spaceman's hero's journey is through the dark unknown of space, it mirrors one's own journey through life, amplified by fiction but rooted in reality. My work revolves around The Lonely Spaceman and his<sup>1</sup> Manual, aiming to re-define the "modern hero", question its relevance, and find how it's application aids in navigating our contemporary lives.

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<sup>1</sup> I say "his" Manual because it is all he knows and has ever known, he is not the author or originator of the Spaceman's Manual.

### **On the Hero's Journey**

In searching for the essence of the modern hero, it is important to define (in a historical sense) the journey of the hero from mythology, science fiction, and fantasy. This will allow us to place the “modern hero” in a historical framework to determine its current validity.

Before Joseph Campbell had fully-formed his theory of the Hero's Journey, Swiss Psychologist Carl Gustav Jung blazed a trail in the compilation and psychological evaluation of “related myths, fairy tales, and religious motifs from remote corners of the world...” (Stein 91) Jung recognized a pattern of similarities between these myths, and worked to build evidence for what he called “archetypes of the collective unconscious”. This theory argues there is a general “hero” archetype that speaks to each person's deep-seated, ideal vision of a hero. “The hero is a basic pattern – characteristic of women as equally as men – that demands sacrificing the “mother,” meaning a passive childish attitude, and assuming the responsibilities of life and meeting reality in a grown up way.” (Stein 91) The passing of this threshold from child to adult is at the core of the hero's journey, and at the core of my most recent works. On the naming of Jung's theory of the Collective Unconscious, Jung says, “I have chosen the term “collective” because this part of the unconscious is not individual but universal; in contrast to the personal psyche, it has contents and modes of behavior that are more or less the same everywhere and in all individuals.” (Jung 3) Jung's work highlights the significance of myth in the human mind, and how (unconsciously or consciously) these ideal “archetypes” can guide one's morals and behavior.

The theory of a Universal ideal or “archetype” is not the only useful theory in my art-making practice. Jung builds his evidence of archetypes by drawing from the dreams of his

patients and introduces a practice he calls “active imagination” by explaining, “By this I mean the sequence of fantasies produces by deliberate concentration.” (Jung 49) While the active imagination process informed his psychological practice by enhancing dream-states in his patients, it has an especially practical use in viewing works of art that use worlds of fantasy and science fiction in a greater capacity than simply story (like my own work.) Active imagination implies a willingness to believe or play along with the world and narrative of the Lonely Spaceman. The viewer should seek to be invested in the world of fiction that my work is based in.

The term “The Hero’s Journey” was championed by Joseph Campbell. Campbell was an American lecturer, writer, and mythological scholar whose work inspired the likes of George Lucas, the writer/director of the worldwide phenomenon, Star Wars. Like Jung’s work on the collective unconscious, Campbell’s book “The Hero With a Thousand Faces” links mythologies the world over, distilling them into simple categories and subcategories. The three categorical steps (with subcategories) in a formulaic hero’s journey are as follows:

<b>I. Departure</b>	<b>II. Initiation</b>	<b>III. Return</b>
The Call to Adventure	The Road of Trials	Refusal of the Return
Refusal of the Call	The Meeting with the Goddess	The Magic Flight
Supernatural Aid	Woman as the Temptress	Rescue from Without
Crossing the 1 <sup>st</sup> Threshold	Atonement with the Father	The Crossing of the Return Threshold
The Belly of the Whale	Apotheosis	Master of Two Worlds
	The Ultimate Boon	Freedom to Live

Although the Hero’s Journey is a theory invented by Campbell in the 1940’s, it’s formula for story telling holds sway and relevance in building modern mythology via film,

television, and fiction. (Limiting examples to merely film) *Star Wars*, *Beowulf*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Back to the Future*, *The Matrix*, *Contact*, *The Hobbit*, *O Brother Where Art Thou*, *Hercules*, and *Field of Dreams* are all examples of the hero's journey incarnate. The reason some of the film's on the previous list are among the most lucrative, popular films of all time is because of their loose adhesion to the main categories of a typical hero's journey. In *The Hobbit* and *Star Wars: A New Hope*, both hero's refuse the call to adventure, but are forced by certain circumstances to proceed nonetheless<sup>2</sup>. In *O Brother Where Art Thou*, *Back to the Future*, and *Hercules*, the hero's are tempted by women aiming to stop the hero from completing their journey<sup>3</sup>. In *Field of Dreams* and *Contact*, both heroes are confronted by the supernatural apparitions of deceased family members<sup>4</sup>. In both the *Matrix* and *Field of Dreams*, the hero's are "chosen" to fulfill some heroic task<sup>5</sup>.

Extrapolating the assumption that the movies can be popular because they follow the hero's journey; one can argue that the film's success via the hero's journey is due, in part, to Jung's theory of archetypes of the collective unconscious. Simply put, the film's success is inexorably linked to its proximity with the "hero" archetype within human collective unconsciousness.

These common points in plot may highlight just how far-spread the hero's journey is in film and television; however, they don't describe the actual personality of the hero. The most important characteristic of the hero in the formula of the hero's journey is the hero's "everyman" quality. The hero-to-be begins his/her story as a typical, average individual,

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<sup>2</sup> I. Refusal of the Call

<sup>3</sup> II. Woman as Temptress

<sup>4</sup> I. Atonement with the Father

<sup>5</sup> I. Supernatural Aid

sometimes even being qualified as an underdog<sup>6</sup>. The reason this “everyman” quality is so pivotal is to convey to the audience that anyone can aspire to greatness in many of the same ways. He or she is usually reluctant to take up the call to action, and is elevated to the role of the hero not by choice, but by necessity. This fact is underlined by the hero’s “Refusal of the Call” (Campbell 59), when the hero temporarily denies taking the road to glory; instead, choosing to live their life as they previously had. The hero’s hand is forced in the next step towards heroic glory. The hero’s reluctance to take the first step is key to their success. The hero does not crave power for his/her own use; more importantly, the hero is concerned with self-improvement and making a difference in their world.

Because of George Lucas’ intense studying of Campbell’s formula for modern myth, and the huge success of the Star Wars franchise, Star Wars serves as the strongest film influence in my work<sup>7</sup>, and will continue to be referenced for its theoretical and modern mythological concerns.

In relating the theory of the Hero’s Journey to everyday life, it is important to note a distinction between one’s own life journey<sup>8</sup> and one’s day-to-day journeys. The former is most clearly viewed from afar, with each step taking months, sometimes years to develop, eventually leading to the discovery of one’s greater purpose in life. The latter of the two types of journeys is more easily accessible and recognizable to an intent viewer. These day-to-day journeys can be as simple as going for groceries, and as complicated as attending graduate school to achieve a Masters in Fine Arts. To describe this step from the view of my greater life’s journey, the completion of this degree will mark the Crossing of the Threshold into the

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<sup>6</sup> It’s a common trope that heroes-to-be are told their whole life that they are nothing, and will never amount to anything.

<sup>7</sup> And like many, it influences my life in profound ways that I never knew films could

<sup>8</sup> Long-term hero’s journey

greater world<sup>9</sup>. Graduation with a Masters Degree in Drawing and Painting will have also marked the final chapter in a smaller hero's journey, the passing of two years in Graduate School<sup>10</sup>.

By now, the theory of the Hero's Journey is well-worn territory in popular culture; so the approach of an artist relating issues of identity, moral obligation, and modern heroicism to modern fiction has to be a varied one. My solution of relating these issues with the world of science-fiction is to present a hero who is imperfect in every way, nearly to the point of uselessness. The presentation of this character serves as a keystone in my graduate-student journey while simultaneously linking my previous works. He is...

### **The Lonely Spaceman**

*Loneliness is the first badge awarded to a Spaceman. Loneliness is an everyday part of a spaceman's profession, but he/she never receives compensation for this. Without loneliness there is no drive for exploration and self-improvement. The drive has to come from within, not from without.*

*-Excerpt from the Spaceman's Manual*

The Lonely Spaceman is an astronaut cocooned in a clumsy, oversized spacesuit. His loneliness is intentional: self-inflicted to enhance the potency of his journey. His communication with the world of people is limited to hand-signals and a three-light response system that tops his helmet. The three lights are green, red, and blue, signifying yes, no, and maybe<sup>11</sup>. He is a character that inspires more questions than he answers. Why is he exploring the far reaches of space? What is his mission? Where did he come from? Who is he?

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<sup>9</sup> That is, I am moving closer in the direction of my ultimate purpose as an artist and as a human.

<sup>10</sup> III. Freedom to Live

<sup>11</sup> The blue "Maybe" button also answers any question's that aren't answered by yes and no. This massive area of ambiguity in communication serves to highlight the Lonely Spaceman's lack of communication skills.



Although the Lonely Spaceman's journey might mirror my own as an artist and as a person, he is the faceless stand in for any individual, and as such he mirrors any journey through a difficult situation. His insecurities, glaring character flaws, clumsiness, and lack of clear communication all serve to speak to anyone who has ever felt like an outsider. His character flaws serve as a disability that restrict him from carrying out the directives in his mission through space.

Although the Lonely Spaceman's main mission is not clear; each decision he makes is influenced by the Spaceman's Manual, a boy-scout-like manual filled with badges that mark achievements along the road to becoming an adult male spaceman. These badges serve as absurd benchmarks in "manhood" for the Spaceman to reach for, so that when he inevitably fails to meet the expectations of the Manual, his below average heroic qualities shine through. The metaphorical journey of the Lonely Spaceman is one aimed at the achieving of the moniker "man". The further understanding and appropriation of the terms "man" and modern "hero" drive the work forward. Specifically, this work sums up the adventure of struggling towards obtaining manhood while fighting loss, loneliness<sup>12</sup>, and confusion.

### **Thesis Work and Process**

The work that makes up my thesis primarily functions around video work that places the bizarre, handmade Lonely Spaceman in sharp contrast to our own modern reality. Pitting the Lonely Spaceman against modern life highlights his quirks and the extreme failures he experiences trying to do mundane tasks. This juxtaposition of science fiction with reality not only functions as a bridge between our world and the world of the Lonely Spaceman, but it

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<sup>12</sup> The typical use of the word loneliness; that is, craving the attention and love of another individual. This use of the word is different than when used in "The Lonely Spaceman" (being alone vs. being lonely)

also functions as a series of visual clues that point out personality traits of the Lonely Spaceman, more easily identified because of their context within our modern world. The video work intersperses the Lonely Spaceman in modern times taking “Space Walks” to accomplish certain missions<sup>13</sup> as well as footage of the Spaceman in his ship’s cockpit, visiting far-off fantastical worlds, and interacting with alien life forms

In “Spacewalk No. 64” (see Illustration 1), the Spaceman seeks to procure water in a public environment, awkwardly interacting with other individuals at a common water fountain. The Spaceman is committed to staying out of people’s way, even if that means making other individuals uncomfortable (Sometimes the Lonely Spaceman goes out of his way to achieve this discomfort). His H.U.D.<sup>14</sup> camera is soaked in an otherworldly blue-green hue. I use this color difference as a visual indicator of the Spaceman’s P.O.V.<sup>15</sup>.

“Spacewalk No. 64” is unique because of the cameras close proximity to the Spaceman and the people he interacts with. There is a uniquely different flavor to the crowd interactions in Spacewalks 64, 892, and 953. The individuals he interacts with are aware of the fact that they are being filmed, changing the context of the Spaceman for a viewer from oddity to art/performance oddity.

The aesthetic of the Lonely Spaceman’s world, and the objects that populate that world all fall within a visual vocabulary that I call Crapsmanship<sup>16</sup>. This invented term sums up the ready-made aesthetic of the work, which is a balance between recognizable everyday objects and basic analog technologies like LED’s, flashlights, and motorized fans. Using recognizable items as a base ingredient is key to the aesthetic world the Spaceman lives in.

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<sup>13</sup> Missions like obtaining water, obtaining sustenance, jerry-rigging his high-tech equipment with everyday materials

<sup>14</sup> Heads Up Display

<sup>15</sup> Point of View

<sup>16</sup> A combination of “craftsmanship” and “crap”

His reality is underlined by the metaphor that the items offer. This is to say, there is always evidence of the salvaged object on which the new object is built, and just like life experiences, trials, and tribulations, the new object is a combination of old and new materials. The ready-made, salvaged look of the objects also shows the clumsy ingenuity of the Spaceman.

These 3-dimensional works from the thesis show are technologies that the Lonely Spaceman has invented to make his exploration of the Universe more productive. (Illustration 2) They include a Passive Eventuality Rifle<sup>17</sup>, a Foreign Substance Analyzer, maps of distant planets, and designs for Space badges<sup>18</sup>. The centerpiece to this thesis show is the Lonely Spaceman's suit, a monument in spacesuit technology: airtight (not really), toxin-filtering (nope), and completely indestructible (false again). The objects that inhabit the thesis show don't simply function as art objects, but they serve as props in service of the greater story of the Lonely Spaceman. The objects build the Universe that the Spaceman lives in

The world of the Spaceman is divided into two distinct realities. The first is the Spaceman's reality that consists of Spaceships, strange worlds, and aliens. The second reality is that of the modern world, where the Spaceman is at his most isolated. The juxtaposition of these two separate realities is highlighted in the video work that links the "Spacewalks". This frantic, almost dream-state is especially clear in the video piece "Morning Crash (Mourning Crash)" (See Illustration 3), in which the real-world life of the Lonely Spaceman bleeds into the dreamy subconscious of his imagined fiction. In Morning Crash, the Spaceman's suit hangs hollow, empty in the closet of an average studio apartment. This feeling of average-

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<sup>17</sup> A weapon that is lethal anywhere from 0 to 100 years

<sup>18</sup> The Merit badge-like system used to mark achievements in the life of a Spaceman

ness is punctuated by the presence of everyday street-clothes, and the appearance of a white cat cleaning itself under the warmth of the closet's light. The Spaceman's equipment is strewn across the apartment. Simultaneously, the Spaceman twitches restlessly in the cramped interior of his Spaceship, falling in and out of reality and unreality until the video climaxes at the sound of a mechanical, creaking faucet. The indistinguishable "tssssss" of a showerhead jumps into life.

### **Previous Works and Process**

After completing this graduate thesis show, it is helpful to peer back through time to understand why my work is where it is. Prior to making the decision to pursue a graduate degree in Drawing and Painting, my work has always revolved around mythology and the role of the hero within it. Although the subject matter in my first few semesters changed slightly, I have remained interested in defining the hero character and his adversary, the villain, and exploring how the two seemingly opposite characters can mingle and exist as one blurry figure. There are a few previous works that morph nicely into and inform my current Lonely Spaceman/Thesis work.

My first foray into exploring the dynamic of good/evil and mythical heroicness came in the form of "trash monsters" in September 2014. These anthropomorphic creatures are an amalgam of man-made garbage, seemingly brought to life by a mysterious toxic phenomenon. They are made of pigmented silicone, wire, and scrounged electronic parts that bring them to life via sound and vibration. Although they are abject and inhuman, they carry a familiar, uncaring quality, which removes them from any connotations of good or evil. They are unmistakably alien, and although they are called trash monsters, they don't feel

threatening: More accurately, they feel pathetic and helpless. These qualities seed themselves in my current work surrounding the Lonely Spaceman.

The trash monsters started as an exercise in materials; wherein I used the inherent qualities of silicone to reference skin and organs and I combined it with technology to take focus away from human bodies. The next step was to determine what kind of world the trash monsters exist in. From a material perspective, I put a lot of thought into why I had chosen found objects rather than purchasing all-new hardware to achieve a different aesthetic. These found objects referenced humanities effect on the world, and the way we fill our landfills with perfectly good technology that is lazily tossed away, when it could more responsibly be recycled and made into something new.

In my mythology, the trash monsters become the by-product of human carelessness as the planet earth is injected with waste, from sea to shining sea. Too concerned with everyday life and their own well-being, humans are blind to the miraculous emergence of the trash monsters, mysteriously granted life via a toxic concoction that happens underground. In this fiction Earth is terrorized by giant robots that attempt to enslave and eradicate human civilization. Although the trash monsters owe the humans nothing, they still decide to take up the mantle of the hero fight back against the outsider robots.

The most natural next step seemed to be to inject the storyline with a human hero, one that I could relate to and use to convey my own feelings of loneliness or disconnectedness. I decided to look at the storyline I had created via the eyes of an outsider, a space explorer who had crash-landed on Earth after all of these epic robot v trash monster battles had occurred. With only the physical clues of the trash that litters the future-earth, the inquisitive space explorer tries to piece together our past, like an archeologist. He collects, sorts, and

catalogues his finds, thousands of years of human history all trapped just under the Earth's surface.

Having crash-landed on the planet's surface with nowhere to go, the space explorer attempts to solve the mysterious circumstances through which the planets inhabitants had vanished. What comes out of his collecting and cataloguing is the "trash dome" which is a pieced together enclosure that protects the space explorer from the harsh surroundings on the future Earth. This idea of a stranded and lost character is one that found its way into my current work, dominated by the Lonely Spaceman.

As well as the introduction of a stranded character becoming the focus of the work, my preference on how a viewer may interact with a work changed in the lead up to this final thesis document. My experimentation led to producing enclosures that either force viewers to enter into a space alone, or view the work through a small window that restricts the viewing to one-person-at-a-time. Confronting the viewer like this works effectively for two reasons. Firstly, the viewer is taken beyond the visual and placed in the physical reality of this play-pretend world (via closeness or forced claustrophobia). Once the viewer has entered or gained proximity with the created space, I confront them with buttons, switches and knobs that turn (and often do nothing). This adds to the absurdity which I find wholly necessary to the conveying of the works deeper meaning. It is at this point that the effectiveness of the piece depends on the viewers' ability (and willingness) to interact with the fictional world they are immersed in.

The second outcome of an enclosure or window is a viewer simultaneously being the viewer as well as being viewed (given that only a limited amount of people at a time can view many of the works I create. Using the thesis show's video piece as an example: only

two people may view the work at once. This turns the two viewers wearing the headphones into part of the installation. The way they are alienated as others watch the way they react to the video is precisely how the Lonely Spaceman functions within the Spacewalks. Although the Lonely Spaceman inflicts this attention onto himself by wearing an absurd spacesuit, the viewer and the Spaceman share attention as the video plays out. The loneliness and confronting objects one-person-at-a-time is a feeling I am chasing with my thesis work. The viewer should have a personal interaction with the objects and videos presented in the gallery space, as if it is a joke or a story just for them.

Two of the most vital characteristics of my previous works that have evolved into current Thesis work are the characteristics of humor and performance. Pat Oleszko is an artist that combines these two things into absurd, other-worldly performances that take place in a real-world setting. In her piece “The Half-AstroNuts Dilemma: Pa’t Two”, 9 astronauts land along the Atlantic Ocean, emerging from the cramped interior of a small spaceship, like clowns out of a clown-car. Their spaceship is an amalgam of wood, cardboard, and paint, and their brazenly colored spacesuits amplify the absurdity of their actions; which seem to be part mission- part ritual. I have found my decision-making while being the Lonely Spaceman on his Spacewalks has been influenced by the flamboyancy of Pat’s Astronuts.

### **The Completion of a Hero’s Journey/ On to the Next One**

An appropriate quote from George Christopher<sup>19</sup> puts each person’s unique journey into perspective: “I’m in your movie and you’re in mine – Two different films, really. We don’t *really* know each other, we just make a guess of knowing each other.” (*Bored to Death*) While the latter part of that quote touches on how little we know about each other as people,

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<sup>19</sup> Ted Danson’s character from the HBO television series, *Bored to Death*

the initial statement couldn't be more profound and true. Each person is the hero of his or her own adventure.

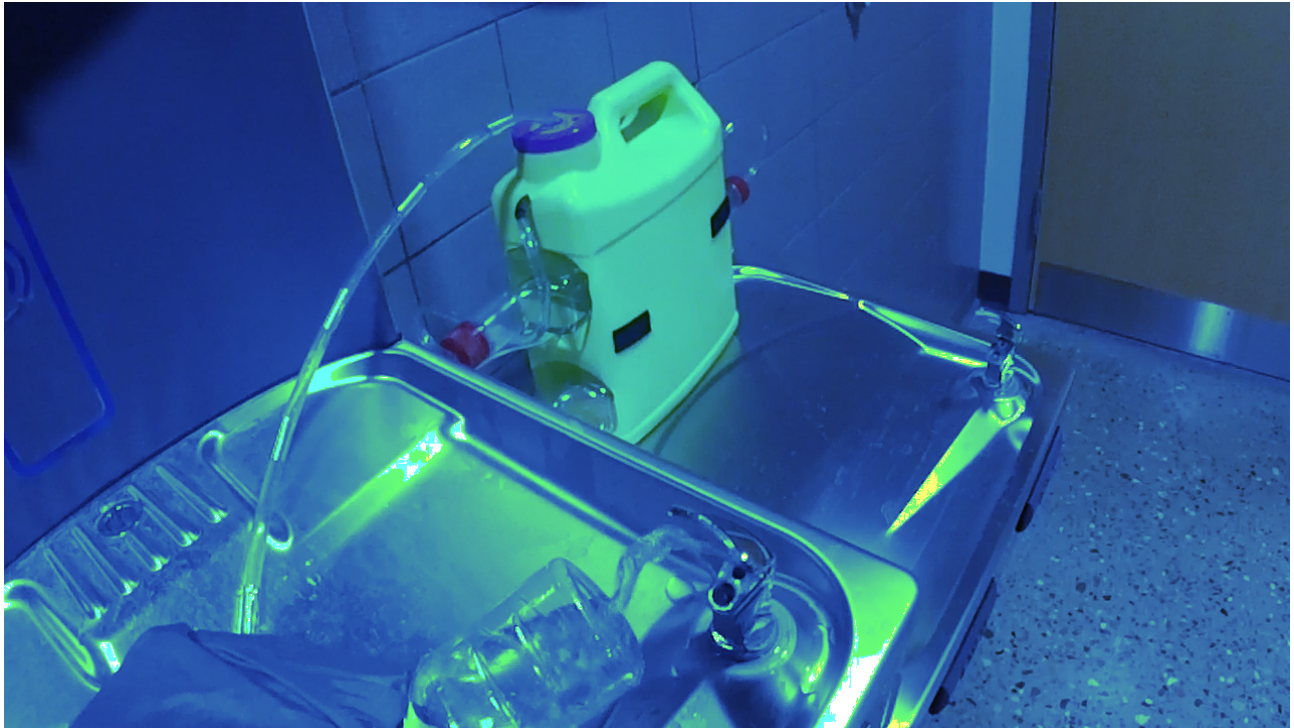
One aspect of my ongoing body of "Spacewalk" videos that alludes to the universality of this statement is the numbering system within the videos. By labeling the Spacewalks with increasingly high numbers, I am able to imply that the Spacewalks are infinite, and this fact is imperative to my research into the relevance of a modern hero. By this I mean to say that moving from one small adventure to another is what makes our modern lives interesting and relevant to the arch of the hero's journey. Each and every conquered adventure, menial or important, is recorded and logged for later re-living: A vast storeroom of knowledge and wisdom that informs our sense of moral obligation day-to-day. Every individual is the main character in his or her own story, given importance through the uniqueness of each adventure. Our lives are variations of formulaic plot points summed up in the collective unconscious, and each individual has the potential to live like the hero they imagine when they close their eyes.

*The grey figure returns to his heaping hunk of spaceship, held together by the labors of his own ingenuity. The spaceship rises into the dark sky, destined to stretch further into the infinity of space... Then later...*

*Crash. Bang. Screech. Skid. Silence... "Here we go again."*



**Illustrations:**



1. Still from “Spacewalk No. 64” - P.O.V. of the Spaceman Procuring Water



2. Installation View: Thesis Show - Herron Art Gallery May, 2016



3. Still's from "Morning Crash (Mourning Crash)"

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